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Inside Washington



Pentagon Papers Point Up Good Intelligence



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WASHINGTON — The U.S. intelligence community often criticized and recently under fire from presidential adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, emerges from the Pentagon study of the Vietnam war with its reputation much enhanced.

War critics will complain that, over the years of U.S. involvement, the Central Intelligence Agency is shown to have conducted covert operations in Indochina. Operational responsibility for such actions is an old controversy, of course, and those sub-rosa activities were ordered by a succession of U.S. presidents and their National Security Councils.

With respect to its major function, intelligence and its assessment, the CIA proves to have been very perceptive over the Vietnam years. The intelligence analysts read very well the indications of what might develop in Indochina as the United

States extended its commitment there.

Specifically, the CIA and the intelligence studies in which CIA participated, rejected the domino theory — the idea that the fall of Vietnam would topple Laos, then Cambodia and then other Asian nations — like a falling row of dominoes. CIA saw limited damage to U.S. interests from a Communist victory in Vietnam.

Additionally, CIA minimized the impact, in North Vietnam, of a restricted campaign of U.S. bombing. It thus dismissed the thesis of Walt W. Rostow that North Vietnam would be intimidated by the possible loss of its tiny industrial complex which had been painstakingly developed after the war with the French.

"INDIGENOUS" SUPPORT

— Rostow, then a State Department official, offered his thesis in February 1964, when the administration was beginning to stress the controlling role of

North Vietnam in the war in the South. At that time, however, intelligence analyses were reporting that the primary source of Communist strength was "indigenous."

That CIA view, of a revolutionary Communist movement identified with nationalistic sentiments carried over from the war with the French, was given little credence by President Johnson and his top aides, according to the Pentagon study.

In June of 1964 President Johnson asked CIA whether the rest of Southeast Asia would necessarily fall to the Communists if South Vietnam and Laos came under their control. That was an occasion on which CIA challenged the domino theory, asserting that "with the possible exception of Cambodia" no nation in the area would quickly fall to the Communists.

Again, administration policy makers were not persuaded, and fears for such nations as

Malaysia persisted in high administration councils, the Pentagon study reports.

In November of 1964, when the National Security Council was considering plans for carrying the bombing to North Vietnam, it was an intelligence panel — including CIA, State Department intelligence and the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency — which said the plan had little chance of intimidating the North Vietnamese.

In the spring of 1965, when the discussions had turned to possible commitment of U.S. troops to offensive combat operations, CIA Director John A. McCone said a change in the role of U.S. troops was inconsistent with the limited tempo of the bombing operations then being conducted. He said the proposed air and ground pressures on Hanoi would not be enough.

"In effect," said McCone in an April 1965 memo, "we will find ourselves mired down in combat in the jungle in a military effort that we cannot win, and from which we will have extreme difficulty extricating ourselves."

STYLE CHANGED — In that memo McCone, the rather dear California industrialist who was brought in to revive CIA after the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion, showed himself to be a full participant in the formulation of U.S. policy. With the benefit of hindsight, one can wish he had been more persuasive.